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EPA contractor still leading mine treatment effort

Daniel Bloom

Environmental Restoration, LLC will continue to spearhead water treatment efforts at the Gold King Mine even in the face of immense scrutiny it and the Environmental Protection Agency face following the Aug. 5 minewater breach into Colorado's Animas River.

EPA announced Thursday that Environmental Restoration, its mine contractor, had awarded a subcontract to Alexco Environmental Group Inc. to establish a portable, temporary water treatment system in Gladstone, Colorado, to continue filtering water discharged from the abandoned mine.

EPA spokesman George Hull said while Environmental Restoration is still working on site, it "cannot make independent decisions on site operation," and that the contractor continues to "operate under the direct supervision of EPA employees on a cost reimbursable basis."

Hull added EPA is still waiting on the results of the independent review and the inspector general's report to determine the company's role in the accident.

Kristina Baum, press secretary for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, declined to comment about whether Chairman James M. Inhofe, R-Okla., is concerned about EPA's contractor continuing to work at the site.

The committee is focused on getting "additional information about what EPA is doing to repair the damage to the mine entrance as well as to treat the contaminated water flow," she said. The committee, among others, has held a hearing on the spill.

Following the breach, multiple probes were initiated — one by the EPA's inspector general and one by the Interior Department's Bureau of Reclamation — to investigate the causes of the mine spill and determine how to best avoid future ruptures.

The rupture occurred while Environmental Restoration was excavating loose bedrock above the mine's old tunnel opening when pressurized water saturated with heavy metals spilled from behind the collapsed material into Cement Creek, a tributary of the Animas River.

The filtering system announced this week will replace temporary settling ponds constructed by the EPA following the release of the 3 million gallons of wastewater.

EPA has said the transition to the portable treatment system is necessary as winter temperatures at the elevated mine site can reach 20 degrees below zero. "Such temperatures make it unsafe to manually treat water at the mine site," the agency said.

The system is designed to treat the approximately 550 gallons per minute of water that continue to flow from the mine, including the discharges related to ongoing work to stabilize loose bedrock. The system is designed to handle up to 1,200 gallons per minute and will "neutralize" the mine discharge and remove solids and metals.

The schedule requires the treatment system to be operational by Oct. 14.

By Daniel Bloom, CQ Roll Call

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